Down Through The Gallery

It was my favourite part of the manor, the *gallery*. Not as in art gallery, filled with paintings or full of students and models; it was, rather, a *balcony* type of gallery. Matter of fact, I overheard one or two of the staff refering to it with the word *loggia*. I had to remind myself it was Italian, and therefore to pronounce the double g's akin to Caravaggio, and *unlike* lagoon. An easy problem to have, if slightly complicated by the amount of insects the place seems to have and their watery reasons to be. *It's the river,* someone said to me. *The tail end of what here is nothing much more than a creek, really. When the Sun is too hot and the sky doesn't make much rain, the river pockets itself in the boggy turf, lake-like and perfectly still. Bugs are, only naturally, what follows.*

That was explained to me when I first came to this place. The next day, I must admit, I caught myself holding a little beetle with my thumb against one of the walls; the little thing for the most part didn't try to move, and perhaps because the sunlight was hitting me in a peculiar way as to bother me, I applied pressure till its form gave way, and smaller parts then felt suddenly pinching my skin amidst jelly bits. Freeing my hand of it, the squished shape seemed most interesting and curious, and then a truer form of pareidolia gave in — soon followed by a small headache.

Many times my wanderings took me back to the gallery. It was vaulted, as they say, and in very good taste: you can always tell if it is, because one could also express the exact contrary feelings. Indeed, the latticework of the inner corners, if pleasant, was surely a nightmare to clean. (I wondered often if the staff would ever mention and amend that this decoration goes by the name of *transenna*, instead.) Most likely, however, the corridor was simply hosed from time to time, as it overhung an area that was used for a garden.

And I'll say more about the latter in just a moment!, but it's felicitous to go about these things in a certain order. Once I arrived, and was taken for a brief *rendezvous* and guided around the precinct, I couldn't shake the initial feeling, in my head confirmed in numerous occasions, tacidly and never aloud, that certain quarters were to remain, to me, a more ou less permanent mistery; the agreement also had the clause, or so it seemed, that I *was* to find myself in strange rooms and halls, if I wanted so bad as to suffer being *also* taken to them, instead of just the ones I'd become so accustomed to.

After some minor proceedings were taken cared of, I insisted, much to the dismay of a handful bunch, and in reality very well could say *fought for*, to have a small room for myself, just the tiniest possible that still resembled a memory of coupled modesty and privacy. *I see,* a figure said, when it was settled. She was older than the other maids, and held a position of authority for it, if not officially by any titles. *Very well,* she said begrudgingly, looking at nothing in particular, with the same tone one could hear, accompanied by the ghostly gesture of affected claps of fingers

tapping into the palm of someone's another hand, a rather stout '*Post-haste!*', and the little crowd dispersed in different directions to make it arranged.

And arranged it was! One old wardrobe stood, impossible to be moved, to the left hand of the narrow mattress; it aligned with the wall beside the door exactly, and when this was opened, it rested on the wall just short of hitting the shelves in front of which the bed was positioned, and frequently my feet would graze and caress the spines of books that there also rested. Some drawers below them couldn't be opened, unless by someone, or something, crawling under the bed. Now, behind both the bedframe and the wardrobe was a bit of mistery: miscellaneous of sorted materials, just variegated enough as to be completely useless — to me, at least.

The sunlight was orange, as the rind of ripe oranges, when I got to it, and closing the door observed all of this all at once, and attempted to see myself, at last, sprawled and confortable. I lay down, looking through the window to my right, towards the dying but still warm sunset. The stool was low enough to see a small part of grass outside if only I lifted my upper body with just my elbows. Suddenly, the cloth of my trousers felt uncouth and tight around my thighs; looking at the door once again, I stripped myself of it until it reached my knees (which were reddened from the legwork done that day) and, through the clumsy motions involved in that, I ended up tumbling a volume of the shelf down and onto the bed.

Initially startled, I brought it close, along with a few others that caught my eye upon inspection. They were *not* ancient tomes, of course; but some, the short ones above all, had a chance of being or containing a translation of manuscripts claiming long ancestry — with varying degrees of commitment. The imagery, nonetheless, was ever enticing, and soon I was transported to a memory of some long years passed. I was back in a classroom, very brighly lit, round a large scarlet beaker: the clotted offals it held were previously unevenly mashed together into a wet solution of flotsams. The professor then poured ethanol into the mixture, and a snotty substance formed and came together. *DNA, this is,* she explained holding part of it with a stick. One could roll it between one's fingers until it disappeared. *What you see, of course, is mostly water,* she added.

Coming out of this trance I also recalled, now correctly and amused, that the gore was nothing else than strawberries; for the blood and pain were only to be found in the pages I had behold. I finished getting rid of my lower clothings, minus the stockings, and freed my chest to breath more properly, but felt exhausted before getting into a chemise. Not being sure yet as to what destiny my wares had in the room I now occupied, I gathered half of all the satchels with me and, together with the clothes and books now on the bed, managed them to under the thickest covers nearby, and finally lay on top of this soft mound as to better see myself under the pale light of the earliest stars. On its hinges, the door looked heavier now under the half-light of the room; the walls went silent and expectant. I proceeded to grip my body from between my legs, shutting them close

until opposite fingers were folded together from the applied pressure. My lungs were held full and expanded my chest over my quivering stomach. The rustling of hair changed to moisture, as gulfs of cold wind licked my body and I imagined the night's mouth savouring the sweat rivering down my shoulders and breasts. *It's mostly water,* I repeated in my head. The Moon was now visible, and made my skin shine akin to a silvery fountain; in contrast, the rest of the room was pushed into deeper shadows, which pierced into my consciousness: I now fancied someone spying on me through the door — not an exployee gathering gossips or a potential partner tempted to rush in, but someone who really, really shouldn't see the display inside the room, for some reason or another.

Turning aside, I faced the window and pushed my sex behind my legs, pressing it against them by arching my lower back to and fro. Immediately, I froze. Widening my eyes, as if unable to move, my breath fell back into my throat, heavy as iron. Someone across the window, from another wing of the manor and a store above mine, had just lighted candles in their room. Only a curtain was between us, if indeed they were anywhere near the window; but, regardless, the sudden fright and how close their view hovered above me discouraged any further misdemeanors. Thus, after the canopy of stars suffered me a while longer, it was the abyss beyond them that cradled me, and I slept a dreamless night, although I'd later recall hearing a soft voice singing over me, and falling quiet when I moved, before I could open my eyes. The melody appeared to have made a dent on my mind, for I caught myself frequently as if remembering its words chanted to me faintly. It seemed to say: *Don't be such a fool, as to leave your bed or depart from your room. For here there's perils, and dangerous creatures loom.*

On the next day, I discovered most of the upper compartments of the sturdy wardrobe to not be shutted — or perhaps locked. There I managed to gather my wares, and later I found myself heading for the gallery. It was still morning, and the light reached the interwoven patterns and wood paneling, the latter in shades of crimson, of the passage; approaching further, I caught an ongoing conversation at the courtyard. *But your peace lilies are such a bore to envision,* someone was saying. *How about irises, instead?* I recognised the voice bearing the answer; it was the old lady of the day before. I'd learn her name in just a moment, but in my head I always thought of her as a governess. She closed one eye looking up, and said to a young creature before her: *Irises need perhaps more sunlight than we have round here, and besides —,* but the other interrupted: *More light! Surely not any more than your little white preciouses; at any rate, even sunflowers learn to grow and stop looking for that Bright Star,* she then looked in my direction and said no more. When I got to her, a moment later, the governess had disappeared behind a door, but could still be heard.

She had brown, curly hair that seemed held very tight together, just above but never touching her tiny shoulders. *I'm Fran!,* she said at some point; and, cocking her head looking over to the left, added: *And that's Mme. Várr. But maybe you already know that.* I said I didn't catch the

name, but that we have met before. Something in my voice, while saying the last part, amused her. She nodded knowingly, but the only answer was: *And what's your name, if I may catch it?* I looked down and suddenly felt shy. *I hope it's not a secret! But then again, if it is, I'd like to know it even better,* she laughed and waited from me. I looked around and finally said it was... Ivy. Ivy Dræger.

Fran paused in silence for a moment and I saw her drawing of air. Her next words sounded high-pitched: *It is not! You're making that up — right now, you are!,* and she looked over the trailing plants until her gaze rested on ivies. She initially wouldn't believe me, but when I said that, if that was to be the case, she could at least be assured it was a kind of chosen name, not made on the spot; the whole thing being, as I put it, *...an awkward circunstance that rendered me self-aware to have to say it for the first time while in a garden, it's all*. Her eyes opened a little, and I guessed she felt the need for excuses; I brushed it off and she then said: *Well, are you poisonous too? As some of these are, I mean,* and we laughted and she showed me the rest of the flowers.

From the entire display, what impressed me most was the grass-grown patches by the edges and corners, a gloomy wild vegetation that was mostly let to themselves. Following some larger roots, we arrived at some odd yellow flowers I knew not. Their broad leaves had the most curious and unique shapes, half a dozen of different outlines repeating over and over again as a rhyming motif. *What are those?,* I asked, and meant to kneel close to them and pluck one out; but Fran did stop me gently, and her touch made me stand back up, intrigued. A shadow crossed her face, and her dark eyes were sharp and grave as heaps of grinded coal. *You don't want to do that,* she said with a distant voice. I stuttered my question back, but now the color had already returned somewhat to her expression.

They used to execute people here, she said and turned to me with a look so stern it seemed to hold in a solid tray every thought both of us wagered. *That gallery at the other side overhung what in older days was this town's gallows, till they built around it when there was no one left. These flowers,* she continued, *are — supposedly, I guess, although wildly believed to be — of mandrake roots. The staff too will not touch it, yet they live without being tended to, from the moisture of this soil. Wouldn't you know?, old blood, innocent blood, forever enriches the soil.* As she said that, Mme. Várr was upon us, and shooed us away from the tall grass, and followed us admonishing Ms. Fran to stop her fancies and ghost stories from getting into my head.

When we reached the fountain near where we originally were, she said: *Mme. Várr thinks one of me is enough. She might be right. Now, with your permission —,* and was already going up a flight of stairs, and I felt strangely alone, perhaps for the first time since I arrived. Noticing Mme. Várr to have also vanished, I took my leave through a door with empty cupboards clustering the passage, and found myself, after a while, in a confortable parlour. I crawled towards and sat by its bay window, studying the manor's eastern landscape.

Closer to the walls stood a few sparse cypresses, a small amount of red flowers and some other evergreens. On the top of a fence, a squirrel ran moving its body in a perfect sinusoidal curve, disappearing a moment later into tussocks by an oak tree to the left. In the distance, across various ill-kept hedges, darker leaves from huge branches fringed the lower background, casting as deep shadows as morning would allow: it was the tree line that marked the beginning of a wooden area used once as a hunting ground.

Squinting my eyes, I saw from their bark the trees to be most likely black walnuts. *It's rather easy to recognize 'em,* my father told me when I was little enough as to be sitted on his shoulders. *Their skin are very similar to dragon scales. You'll see.* At first, I thought it was a silly idea, for almost every tree has rough enough 'skin' as to potentially be taken for a large lizard's one. But, when I saw, I knew he was right. It looked exactly like that. He also said, of course, that: *If you pluck some of the scales off, you'll find chocolate! Sadly, you can't eat it now, because it has been already digested by the beast.*

Thinking still about dragons — or *drakes*, rather, I reminded myself of the books in my room, and of what Fran said the yellow flowers were, and hence when hours passed and the day was nearing its end I entered my room and again closed the door behind me. Going through the content indexes, when there was any, I found two volumes mentioning either mandrakes or mandragora roots, as I discovered they were also called. The second one, but the first I did consult, from which I copied some of the few words on the subject, expounded thus: "*...In any caſe, their behaviour is much likened to that of conjured familiars, with an important diſtiction: moſt often, one can only acquire it by means of buying, and aſpire by the ſame means only to get rid of it. The price of reſelling need be always ſhorter than previouſly. If one cannot deduct from the original amount, the infernal herb ſhall be with him (or her) till the moment of death, thereby damning his or her ſoul, eternally and by the Name of the Moſt High.*

"*It goes without ſaying, and indeed this particular is conſidered too uncouth for the majority of ſcholars of the Occult to mention, that an Engliſhmen could — if in the latter dire poſition, and records suggeſt the ſame to have happened more times than confortable for one's own imagination —, an Engliſhmen could, I repeat, always travel to colonies whither the coin of the Empire is not the only wrought, or even to poorer countries and continents, where even our ſmaller coin reach to total sums that can be further broken into ſeveral parts.*"

The other title I found explained the mandrake to be of humanoid shape under its leaves and flowers. The wretched plant was to be found nowhere, except, as Fran suggested, under gallows where pure souls, or the "*...closest thing to it possible for Humanity to have bore in its bosom by a number rather short of years; meaning, of course, the youth*", were martyrized slyly in anonymity and mourned only "*...by the silence now complete of dwellings already absented of two or three*". I

soon would drop this one edition without a want for the fullness of information it contained, for the author, if brutal in honesty, seemed to enjoy too much it's own pen and the feelings it meant to cause and raise; perturbed and frightned, I closed the curtains and rested my head on the wall, hoping to catch glimpses of the upper window without being spotted.

Night proper came steadfastly, and the Moon amused the stars with her smiling lip. That which was not shadow appeared grey: the grass was made of cinder, and the boughs of trees became petrified, as the rags of thin clouds trodded under constellations. Still, the moroseness of the day, combined with the adventures of last evening, sedimented my thoughts into a numbing lullaby, and I fell asleep before I knew my eyes were closed.

A clattering thud brought me back to my senses, as if out of a swound. The noise lingered in my ears, distracting me from the fact that my legs felt heavy, and so they faltered. Cold glintings were round me, hitting the corners of my eyes; I threw my hands and stumbled, adjusting from what I remembered my body orientation to had been last — because I wasn't in my room, nor lying down. I was standing in the middle of the manor's main kitchen; kettles and assemblages of pans looked at me with motes of secretive light, and my fingers went along the edges, opened by time and humidity till they felt soft to the touch, of copious cupboards.

My hand knocked over an object that rolled away and produced a clinking sound against a couple of glasses; managing to get a hold of it and noticing it was sharp, I carried a small ice pick, that in that moment I took for a knife, close to my chest. Different shades of black were sewn and mended together, forming at every turn a dreadful and shifting patchwork quilt I was fearful of bearing, for, as often transpires, widow's cloaks are only too prone to become bitter burial shrouds; furthermore, lonesome as I was, I had only myself to pity me, however briefly. Quickening my barefooted steps and threading wooden tiled floors, ever feeling as if a sallow creature's visage stood behind corners, or up high and looking down, its owner squatting above doorframes or spread between archs, I realized suddenly where the house was squeezing me into, and a few moments later I found myself entering the courtyard.

Even then, across the fountain and white lilies, invisible hands seemed to guide me ever in the direction of those odd yellow flowers. The Moon was but a slitted cat's pupil, providing unhelpful witnessing of a night's crime; diligently, I pressed my hand upon the soil, the stems rising from between my fingers. Against my sweaty palm, something slightly shifted, pestling the earth from inside; the wriggling grew in intensity, and I pulled away, afraid that the roots were burrowing their way as to grapple my fingers. The area round the flowers looked presently as if recently dug, and through the porously ground a pressure could be felt, likened to a wind current, rapidly developing to a collective scream fluted by widening gaps.

I was knelt over, with no one to tackle me from fancy or trance, although the prospect of

thereby submitting my soul and honor to anything in the night made me tremble and recoil; nonetheless, my gesture was meant only as a mean to closer peer above the earthly swarming pool before me. The marshy vegetation, reeds and rushes, in the meantime seemed to have closed in and peer, themselves, at me or at what I observed. Standing was an impossible task, but I tried, regardless; it was as if the weight of a dozen knotted nets secured me in place. *Swear by it!,* I heard a voice say inside my thoughts, as if I was the one to put it there, for I knew immediately what it meant. That is to say, I knew not to what I was swearing *by*, only how to perform the act itself.

Commit by acts, and keep your heart to yourself: we do not need nor require it, although blood... forever enriches the soil, the voice continued, quothing Fran in half a mockery. I retreated the nightgown's hem over my left thigh and over my hip bone, and slowly slided the ice pick towards myself. It punctuated the soft muscle, running cold beneath my skin and tearing it open from the end till the utensil's rounded grip. Dark blood verted in thick streams, along strips of flesh draping loosely from the open wound. Hungry buried mouths chewed with grinding teeth the bloody and copper scented soil. Lightheaded and on all fours, I took my leave scrambling my way through the tall foliages and spiny varieties of acanthus.

Barely able to find my room across the halls of the manor, I fell dismayed across the floor; the vague sky was a deep and rainy mist of gloomy clouds, and little more I could do than to crawl towards the bed under the cold hour before dawn. As if from leagues away, I noticed that the blood had stopped leaving my body as fast, and this modest relief carried me unto a deadly state of unconsciousness.

It was well past noon when I was awakened by knocks on the door. Part of me expected to find myself under the bed, as I didn't quite remember climbing onto it — also, throughout my sleep, last night's darkness never seemed to have left me; it was only by pondering these things that from behind the curtains the sunlight finally tossed the abhorred film from my eyes. In a couple of minutes I managed to open the door, expecting still to hide most of myself behind it, but Várr landed a heavy hand upon it, and the door grazed me till it hitted the wall to my right.

Holding the door opened, she looked gravely at me — never under eye level, to which I felt grateful, but thereby betraying a lack of any need of doing such a thing. *Ms. Cotter meant to give this to you,* she said. *I was supposed to slide the note under your door, but I judged it better this way, since you are obviously still inside.* While maintaining eye contact, she then stepped aside, allowing me to see a mudded trail of barefooted prints leading to my room, and as I looked down at myself by following it, I gasped in horror and guilt.

I tried to grab Fran's message, frantically, but it was pulled away last second. *Thank you, Mme. Várr,* I began saying, to the best of my abilities, adding a couple of muttered words about the garden in mixed excuses that didn't raised further suspicions, for she nodded, happy of confirming

to herself whatever she decided had really happened.

No doubt not any less eager to close that interaction, she gave me the note and left, avoiding the trail in the passage that came through where I stood till the recently stained mattress I found myself only moments ago. I went and sat close to the wall, looking over my body while putting aside the letter, written in a more torned than folded yellow page. The front of my linen and cream coloured gown had much the likes of a lace-up Mædival shirt, with plain needlework round the neck; the cut was overall minimal, with sleeve ruffles at the wrists. It was long enough as to hover above the knees when standing, although, as everyone that has ever tried to rest on skirts, I suspect, knew, it was hardly different of an experience than lying down undressed, if only clinging to a silky sheet pressed against one's bosom, which could also end up flying, if they moved half of what I was used to.

Some untrimmed hairs spotted the line between the breasts, and could be seen through the zigzagging of the lace closing the rounded cleavage. Under the Sun's rays, I observed the lack of any further undergardments, as the pores of the cloth gasped for fresh air and gaped at the sight of light. Várr keeping her line of sight came to mind; and the weight of my sex laid across my thighs brought back a weird memory. Along one of my legs, a deep crimson cleft looked weeks old, but I felt the leg's muscles still aching, as if the mending had been only superficial. Up to my shins, my feet were covered and baked in dried mud.

Pressing my thumb on the scar in disbelief, I retrieved a bloody fingertip, and smudged it on the yellow letter. Somehow, it was the only proof I had to have effectively drawn blood, and I was reminded of my oath. Leaning back against the wall, I caught a pair of eyes looking at me! At first, they didn't move, nor ever seemed to blink; then, slowly disappeared away from the bottom corner of the upper window above me. Someone had been observing me, impossible to say for how long, or at least looking in the general direction of my room — with a frightful stare, whatever the case.

My pulse was fast, and the note throbbing in my hands as I started reading. It said but a few words: *Ivy! It's Fran. I must've missed you this morning, and because of that you were in my mind for the longest hours instead. I can only wish to have this message reaching you while you're well-disposed. Imagine my surprise waking up last night to an unknown soft melody or chanting, only to go searching for it, and finally seeing you asleep across and below my window! I say 'asleep' although it was you yourself singing, it seemed. Perhaps you'd like to know what it was that you were saying, I thought, so I copied it from memory after getting hold of a pencil. Here it is (even thought it's probably all familiar to you):* ...Mind you not being shaken astir,/ from cozy nests, by the Sylphs' firm screaming roar;/ 'Tis in the air, everywhere, the whistles allure.

PS. By the way, did you say your last name was Drägger? I've being asking around, since

it rang some old bells of mine. && Don't worry, I didn't look at you sleeping for that long.

Having read the note, I looked once again to where I had last seen the glaring eyes; to Fran's apartment, I assumed. The sum of informations thrown at me put my head in turmoil, and I decided to passively meditate upon matters while taking a deserved bath — and lunch, at the same time, for I felt *starving*. Something Ms. Cotter had said gave me an idea, and I decided *not* to be well-disposed, and act as if I'd fallen ill for the rest of the day. Hence, expecting the next morning to restore my spirits, at least enough to discuss the spelling of my surname with my neighbor, I retired back to my room.

Turning its corner, I saw the passage to had been cleaned, including my apartment's floor; but not the bed, which seemed intentional. Perhaps on a better day I'd have climbed the dirty mattress in stubbornness, but I did felt guilty, and got it changed; it wasn't quite pride, but I quietly smiled to myself thinking if I wasn't making it even more vexing to Várr, once it came to her knowledge. Maybe and most likely not, but being the right and proper type of annoying lifted me a little.

The next hours passed rapidly, but mostly in idleness — at least on my end; round the house, however, there was plently movement coming from the groundskeepers, whose steps and trodding could always be heard, along the hissing and piping of birds. I closed my eyes, as afternoon became early evening, and it ocurred to me that for the longest time, every night I went to bed, I held no one either in my thoughts or in my heart. Love was not, to me, a strange feeling, but I seemed to have passed unperturbed to its motions for the better part of my days.

Before I opened my eyes again, I fancied seeing myself in a dark and empty glade, and I laughed, for someone was telling a fireside tale, and I was trying to not look scared; but I couldn't see who was talking, which made me feel unsafe and dreadful. Now the ghost story was at its end, as I sensed from the voice sounding more eager; the rushed words broke into a gurgling: it was coming from large branches, off in the distance, fanning to the ground in one single motion. Something was already about me, I felt it — as if an enormous praying mantis had been projecting its front legs, rehearsing a sudden thrust —, yet I saw but shadows; expecting footsteps upon the grass, my ears heard only the crackling close to the dim bonfire. As I looked up, I saw a monstrous face, larger than life, give a most hateful scream, taking me to the ground.

My legs pedalled on the bed from the fall, and I was awake. The scream still lingered on my mind, as I grew increasely suspicious of my room. Regardless of how late it seemed to be, I decided to leave it. Taking a light source with me, I opened the door, but was swiftly grappled back inside by Francine!, whom I apparently startled just as much, as she explained gasping for air, barely as she had arrived for us to exchange a few due words.

Heavens!, she threw herself on the (clean) bed, still breathing heavily. *What! Where could*

you possibly be going?, and as she said that a sly smile appeared on her lips. *Surely not the courtyard, I hope.* I was still aghast, and answered only: *I imagine Várr wouldn't like that very much,* to which she simply said: *No. She wouldn't.* There was something particular to the way she spoke, however I could only conjecture what their conversation had been on the subject. I couldn't exactly reason it out, but I felt a slight distance between me and Fran grow since we last met, and therefore I wasn't keen on asking her further on this issue, and did let it be.

Sitting up, her hand bumped onto something, which did make a ruffling noise. It was her letter; she held it between her hands, and leaned backwards, looking through my window to hers. *So my message did reach you, I'm only too happy to know,* she said, then asking if I read it. I nodded, and she looked at me for a long moment. *Perhaps I am wrong and come across a little desperately, but,* she made a pondering pause, *I do not see why you seem all too gladly to chastise a friend; and, if you were to argue we're not within friendship binds, I'd beg to at least hold me in you favour.*

You seemed to have been worried about me, and did indeed take me but in kindness, but I wonder now, I said to her, *if all of this is rather a curiosity, and if your worries are concerned not with my being, but my name instead.* Fran took my meaning, and sighed heavily. *I admit to have been prying about your last name, more than modesty allows it, in any case. It sounded familiar, till it came to me why. They did find your father around this parts, is this true?,* she asked.

It was. Round four months ago, a man identified as H. Dræger was found by the western marshes, near the end of the river, just about where the latter cuts a loop closer to the outermost fields of the manor's precincts. He was lying facing down when they found him, they said, and he seemed to have drowned somewhere up the river, a few days earlier. The news ran faster than the authorities, which had to be pulled from the closest district, all the way across our local hamlet. Because of that, me and mother were there before the body was moved.

They had rolled him on his back; the townsfolk were curious, but backed away from the sight since. His ribcage, at first concealed, lay exposed, opened by a large gap; the bones protruded from black and rotted flesh, spotted with glistening coral pink, as jagged rocks atop a cliff. Within the opened stomach, I catched only an impression from the distance I was held, across the tears welling in my eyes, was a hefty mass, convulsing and swarming, breaking apart and regrouping again round the butchered torso. Suddenly, the rotten parts swelled, spraying a convulsing *something*. They were roaches, mostly, as well as beetles and other large insects, exploding in every direction, producing a sound as if the millions of legs were scraping the insides, feasting and crawling and burrowing holes.

Fran's voice took me back to the room. She had just said: *It was believed to have been a robbery, but that's as far as I know.* Her inflection meant to convey that she didn't pursued the tragedy's particulars any further than that, rather than admiting or insinuating the little she could

find rendered her somehow more innocent. But I knew she *was* playing coy with me, at the same time. Sitting by her side, I nudged her hand with mine, before holding it. *Not a single soul became any richer, however briefly, with my father's death. He was killed, after all; not robbed,* I said. *Why?,* she asked, softly. I answered: *As you might more or less know, there is perhaps twelve families total, branching out amongst themselves, throughout our village. We are, or were, since I've been sent here, much aware of each other. We knew, in our house, me and mother, as did our neighbors, and their neighbors also. He died... because he was my father.*

Fran looked down as I was expouding what she had so desired to know. Ashamed and flustered, she stood on her feet, uncertain of her movements, and bid me goodnight, disappearing next through the door and round the passage. I meant to follow her, but my wilt withered in my heart, and I decided to, instead, watch her window, till a light be seen. I debated if she should ever know why her family had accepted me, and my mother gladly forsaken her duties to her daughter.

Minutes passed, with no sign bespeaking her arrival, and I grew wary. Renewing the courage I had previously mustered, I ultimately parted ways with my watch, and left the apartment. The manor's harbored bleakness encircled me in a fearful whirl; at first, I intended to roam round the unknown quarters of the house, but now I was heading upstairs, hopeful of catching Fran somewhere along the way. However, I reached her door, which lay open, before I saw or heard of anything, anything at all, coming from her or otherwise.

Following the outer wall of Fran's room to the left of the head of the stairs, across a southwards corridor, a set of windows overhung a near patio, invisible from my receded window as it stood behind a curve of the building. To the left and across the back of the house, widdershins, it connected to the courtyard; to the right, the patio lead to a further gazebo, amidst heavy trees, by a trail of flagstones. There, about to disappear inside the frightful and deep shadows of gnarly oak branches, was Ms. Cotter.

I hurried downstairs, secured by the handrail, and decided it'd be faster if, instead of returning towards and across my apartment, in order as to take the route I was most accustomed to, I headed eastwards. Once there, I quickly found my way to the gallery, intending to climb over the balustrade between its higher columns, and rush from the landing to where Fran was. A few moments later, I was crossing that rich balcony one more time — from the opposite usual end. It didn't seem any different at first, but as I walked I took notice of its ribbed vault; the patterns were not as mirrored as suggested by the crossing of its lines and the curved, ondulating stone where they were laid; the casted shadows filled the hollows of its surfaces with the welling up tide of this token of despair, this cloak with which the absence of light forms as to hide itself — from the abhorred *nil* that is everything but in nakedness —, while its hands and teeth smother and prey upon the things of the World.

Lost in these thoughts, a pang crossed my body, for I started bleeding anew; my wound was rendered open as I pressed upon it, and I felt as if bile accumulated in my stomach. Huddled to the ground, my breath was shallow as my knee pressed against my chest; when I lifted my eyes again, the sky was no more. The gallery was all of a sudden warm and stuffed; it wasn't the heat of a hearth, but the kind produced only by decomposition and waste. At once, the space between my fingers became oily, and parts of my hair ran across my increasingly sweating brow.

The wind carried a frail tune, and some whispered words with it, of which I discerned only the few that managed to enter and breach the entrapment of what appeared to me to be or to soon serve as a funèbre dark box — that is to say, a sarcophagus —, as they made their way through the dents in the stones of the outside walls, and I fancied to hear but this: *...For here there's perils, and dangerous creatures loom... 'Tis in the air, everywhere, the whistles allure... Or else, thy house, thy solely boon, shall be... Within their lair, the starry air, your tomb...*

Clinging to the wall on my right, I kept on; I didn't try to retreat my steps, for the corridor presently standed as if stretching forever in both directions. My leg started faltering, and my steps more and more were encumbered by the bloodletting heaping down and beneath my turnshoes. In my head, as if from above, I thought myself the palest thing amongst the gallery, drained as a fly, by a cunning spider, within a forgotten crevice. And, then, I saw it — the Moon. Only, the Moon had eyes, and they looked at me from the face in my dreams.

Its countenance had the proportions of a chandelier; it was leathery, and, as it moved, the skin fabric stretched — as if it was made of layers upon layers of silk; but the latter was filthy, stuck with rotten moisture and black specks beneath the surface, which were tore down, sanding to the ground as the thing writhed, perhaps fighting to countain the hideous life it bore within, behing its eyes, inside its sinuses. Vibrating to its left and right, I saw now two major wings, as I realized the creature had brought night to the gallery by flying onto the side of the manor's wall, likened to a gigantic moth with the wings of a black owl.

Swarthy hands hugged the nearest columns beside the head; they seemed to be shortly furred, and their size would allow for my torso to be grabbed as swiftly as someone might hold their own wrist with their other hand. A wavery motion ran across one of its wings, slowly. A gust of wind crepting inside its embrace. I shivered for a moment; rays of moonlight caught my eye, and I saw the floor blackened with roaches and beetles.

I looked again at the wings, and meant to touch them, but as I approached I saw at once the huge belly of a spider, opened akin to a star. The muffled sounds of scratching and scraping, of crawling and fluterring, rustling and clicking, filled my ears, and tears drowned my eyes. For but a moment, I thought the previous impervious darkness to had been merciful. At once, a question occured in my mind; it had a voice I heard once before, and it said: *For what is the dark if not a*

misjudge to the eyes and senses; a vile dream for the mind that devours itself?

The creature's Moon's eyes were bent on me. *Who are you?,* I asked, lost for words as I nonetheless was. *Victims, some,* it said, hoarsely. *Victimizers, all.* Spiriling bruises were produced as it spoke, and an invisible cord tightened the creature's neck, stretching it away, thin and long, till a spray of moth flies came about, gushing. The visage then turned its globular, barn owl-like skull, till it rested upside down. A mouth slitted open between its eyeballs, as if by a razor, connecting both; the flesh was pulled open, revealing melting gums and charred flesh.

Behind me, the crimson panels went aflame, burning with a suave scent of cedar. At the same time, horrid shrills came from behind the latticeworks, as if large rodents were crying with the hurting voice of cicadas. Under the red, sap-dripping flare, which produced branching wisps of fire that threatened to ignite the stuffed air contained inside the gallery, I saw it — the creature — in full. Beyond the critters, mostly spiders, projecting knotted, twitching and interwoven fingers throughout the wings's inner surfaces, hefty vines and root walls screened a scenery yonder; there, a bonfire mirrored the one from the panels, dimly illuminating an impossible glade. A familiar story was being retold; it was about me. It was about what happened to my father.

The thing's face changed again. Bloodshot eyes glazed over, bulging from its orbits in different directions; the mouth was terribly swelled, purple and round, resting in front of its chin. The creature's chest opened in a V-cut, and from the lowermost angle, leveled with its bare navel, poured forth a swarming mass of roaches, glinting reddish brown. *We knew of you from the blood spilt,* a hovering voice said over my shoulder. One of the hands grasping the fluted columns pushed a wing back, bringing it over the balustrade, facing up over the floor before me. Curdled in a concentric pattern, a downwards curved staircase was produced. *Perhaps, because of your well disposed oath, as a gesture of good faith,* the voice slithered into a sizzling, originating amidst tongues of cedar's fiery ambers, *we can show you him; and how he is faring now.*

Tiny rocks crackled as my feet landed on the uppermost step. Stones of gravel ornated the walls for a while with a brighter aura, till they became of metal cladding and darker; the floor, at first made of timber (also rather grey-coloured, for it was covered in rock dust), in the manner of a scaffolding, turned into brickworked limestone. The passage was narrow, although every turner grew larger, if only by a bit; it was impossible, this being so, of foreseeing the next level with any clarity, or holding the one before in sight for too long.

Where the walls transitioned again to mineral formations, but plainer than at the entrance, I had the impression of being inside a cave; the steps, weather-worn, had curves in the middle sections, and seemed cutted *into*, rather than wrought *with* the stone. Alighieri's topography of an inverted mountain came to mind as I kept descending: a coiled serpent being held from the heights by the same Mighty Hand one could often see in the Marseille's aces. I looked up, then, and across

the solid lines and shapes I had traversed, in the assaulting flash of a lightning, I imagined an iron nail, long as a rod, bent for a hook, holding a towering dragon's head through its chin.

I realized, with the certainty only dreams bestow, to be in a spire, about to reach the tower of a cathedral. Soon after the wall to my left opened up, to reveal what I thought to be a chasm, I reached the sombre floor. Something troubled my heart — a sentiment of longing, which beckoned, from my weary feet and aching wounds, towards Francine, for I had abandoned her pursue, and knew not of her.

Lost in wonderings, the chilling sensation of the glazed tiles of the floor struck me as an afterthought. Presently, thinking it to be refreshing upon all the soareness, I retired my turnshoes and left foggy footprints towards a curious door. It was yellow at the top, and black lower down; its left was tinged red, and green in the right side. I pulled (and pushed) on the iron rings, but it didn't move. Bashing them, also, produced no noise I could hear.

Scouting for the choices I had, returning was the worse and most obvious one. It was possible, regardless, that the gesture of good faith was meant as a tease. *If I was indeed to go back,* I pondered, *what happens if there's another closed door at the entrance?* I was not keen on going down a second time. I looked at the door again; as I did so, I noticed the lower quarter to be opened: it was as dark as before, but it stood now as a passage and not anymore a barrier.

Passing one arm across the threadshold while crouching, I procured the doorlock on the other side. However, there was none: the ceiling was very low, and damp, and the hollow was but a tunnel or a grotto. Lying down, I crawled inside. The passage was wider than tall, and I was able to use my legs to push me further, only eventually grazing my back as I overdid the movement.

The tiredness had mostly dulled my limbs; still, breathing heavily, I made to the other end of the tunnel as briefly as possible, although dreading raising the awareness of whatever could be lurking by the edges, where the floor felt colder and made me retreat my hands whenever I strayed to either side. Pushing a wooden surface, it gave in: a door opened, and I jumped out of the jet-black hole. My eyes had habituated to the darkness already — the whole place had been, at most, of a dimly glint of dusk — and, for this fact, the candlelights of the next chamber brighted the closest I could remember of a sunlight's memory.

I saw now that the door I opened had been in reality a cupboard pushed aside the hole in the wall (still as veiled by darkness as before). Entering the room next to it, and through it to the next one, a part of me expected to break into one of the sides of the chancel part of a tall and nightmarish church. Instead, it was the town's old chapel: made entirely of pinewood, with brown marks all over, somehow still resisting the white layers of paint that, with time, turned beige; a beautifuly crafted rood, made out of a willow tree, charmingly crooked, hanging above and behind the altar; the lack of any stained glass windows, after a tempest destroying the one it had; the pews

of dark wood, *& cetera*, *& cetera*.

Regardless of all the details, the lighting and casted shadows didn't make quite sense; they looked strange, as if an error of perspective had make itself into the draught. Eery, I cupped my elbows in my hands, and started threading my way across the short nave. Three, four, five steps, maybe, then redoubled with haste; and, just about when I was preparing to run, I halted.

Something moved, causing one of the pews to creak ever so softly. My senses knew before myself from where it originated, and I caught someone's shoulders peering over the horizontal lines of the benches. Even if I passed the altar, I did not know for sure there would be further passages, or at least ones that didn't loop on themselves. I hugged one of the numerous wooden pillars, all of them joining into an intricate arabesque at the vaulted architraves, putting it between me and the occupied aisle as I backed away.

Reasoning that going much close to the sidewall was also a manner of cornering myself, I simply looked back to the chapel's entrance, wishing to retrace my steps out of there. In the same instant the thought occured to me, I heard a voice I recognized: *I suppose it would be the wiser thing if you'd go,* he said. *But then again perhaps the evil has already been done, since I once again behold you, daughter...* His voice trailed off for a moment. *What was it? Ivy, I think? This place eats away at you.*

What is this place?, I asked. In the meantime, he had stood and made their way to the edge of the nave, by the carved pillars. *Surely I use the word 'place' loosely. But, pray tell,* he said, peering from behind the pillar I was moments ago, *why do you live amongst my murderers?* Mantaining his gaze as best as was able to me, given the circumstances, I answered: *I hope death didn't make you naïve, father of mine. What you ask rings true, but truer still it'd be if I never moved at all. Besides, it wasn't my wish.*

It wasn't?, he seemed curious, althought seemingly taken back by what was said. *Mother... she had no kindness to offer my way, not in the end, at least; and I, no joy to share with her, I suppose. She sent me away.* He nodded in silence when I was finished. *What is it like — dying?,* I said, with suddenly no real interest. *Crowded,* he said. Cleaning my throat and shifting my weight from one foot to the other and back again, I meant to leave. I felt my fists heavy before I conceded to me enraged. *You should know, this wasn't a present to you,* he said when I was already at the entrance, *but one for your expectations. Don't come back here.*

Without glancing back, even as I crossed the room next to it, I arrived at the one with the hole next to the ground. Taking better notice of it now, it was awfully off-putting how round it was at that end, with the wall crumbling thin at the rims. Barely one-palm distance insise the tunnel, inscriptions could be made out; I suspected they spireled through the entire passage, although the only name I discerned was Adonai Ha-Aretz; I didn't know if it was the first or last of the whole

sequence.

By the midpoint, I hit something, rather soft and damp; it couldn't be the coloured door, I knew. A portion of something fell out of it, with a muffled thudding sound, and I reached my hand in front of my face. The tunned had collapsed. I started digging, and thrusting my arms forwards, swimming them as to get large amounts of earth and a few roots I grabbed, here and there, behind me. Minutes passed, and I was in the center of a constantly moving buried-in space; there was as much soil behind as there should be before me, I thought. But the door never came; eventually, I was certain I had passed it already.

I reached, then, what could only be the end of a web of rootlets. Pulling on them as if on the chain of a lamp, a naked blue sky saluted me. Emerging from the underground, I saw myself standing in the courtyard, amidst a tall patch of sugarcane. Seeing no one nearby, I darted for the abandoned cupboards room; from there to indoors proper — and finally to my own small chamber. There, when I finished catching my breath, I headed to the bathroom, still peering over turns and opened doors, less myself than a wilded animal.

Locking the door and throwing the key into the sink, I also pushed a sturdy storage unit, barricading the entrance. I sat on top of it and rested the back of my head against the door's heavy panels; the frilly nightdress I was in was soaking wet in mudded water; my heart was bashing against my left side as a ball secured my rubber bands. My hands were the ones of a graverobber. When the water as at last ready, I entered the bathtub just as I was.

The chilling sensation of the wet and dirty cloth against my warm limbs but even colder extremities, conjoined with aching scratches and minor cuts and otherwise bruises of all kinds, excited my imagination, giving me a shameful erection, which lifted a portion of my dress, as I walked towards the bath. The latter, nonetheless, was exquisetely hot, and I relaxed amidst the raising steam, at the same time enjoying a modique of safeness, despite of everything else, outside or in the World at large.

Kicking my heels up and over the tub's green edges, I pulled myself under; opening my eyes, I looked at the surface of the bathwater, trying to hold my breath till all the ripplings dissipated. It became rather difficult more quickly than expected; the acute pang of soft tissue being torn apart inside of me hit me as an intracardiac injection of epinephrine. *Crowded!,* what a cheeky joke. I hope it hurts to die.

You should know how one can hear an entire ocean if one have but a shell, I heard my father's voice from an early memory. *But, did you know?, you can hear the clickery-clack of one train; one specific train, that is; rolling its way over bridges, if at night you cover your ear just right with a blanket, as your breathing moves you slightly each time.* He used to travel a lot, many times a year, and whenever the date approached I'd have problems sleeping, or nightmares of his

railcar falling into cliffs. Eventually, he made a tradition of sleeping with me the night before.

Did you hear the train last night?, he would say first thing in the mornings of the week leading up to his departure. *Did it made across fine?* The whole thing was silly to me, even then, but it worked. Till one day, as it was bound to happen, when it *didn't* made across fine, and I cried more than ever before, which added an unfortunate surplus of stress to our household, because father got himself into trouble with mom — although, some of the time, rather the opposite seemed true. Both were, however, successfull in hiding from me the situation's true colours.

Be that as it may, the night before journeying father came to my room. He was all too tired, and perhaps used to this routine, and lay down heavily on the bare mattress, behind me, with fewer words of comfort than usual. A couple of hours passed, and the door opened a little. It was mom; she also seemed tired, and came, dragging her feet on the floor, to my side. The gentle rustling and creeking had awoken father, that rolled to his left and embraced my waist, pushing me slightly. The contact of my behind with his crotch startled me, as I tried to lean forwards and away, without fighting his arm. From the movement, mother glanced over me, to whatever the little she could make out in the dark, for she had lowered herself and had been talking to me a few whispered words, putting strands of hair behind my ear.

At last, she bid me goodnight and walked out of the room. Lanky beams of candlelight vanished from under the door, and I started whimpering, silently as I could, because, for the most part of mother's per usual amiably nothings said, father had lowered his breeches, carrying one of my hands to his sex, which I held while still looking at her. Afraid of openly resisting what was happening, I locked my legs shut, but he managed to put his raspy hand between them, and every illusion I had of he maybe thinking I was mother shattered, as my member was procured and held behind me, pressed against his own; I cried when he entered me.

After that day, I stopped listening for trains. Weeks passed, and father returned home. And many times he did, after that; and at each one I was less and less glad to see him. Mother knew, eventually; she had to. As did the neighbors, and his neighbors, also. (I didn't lie to Fran, after all. Not completely.) With time, I started suspecting she spied on us on occasion, and would always attempt to meet her gaze across the crannies of my room's door.

My lungs gave in, and I exploded out of the stilled surface of the bathwater. I had started, absent-minded, fondling my hardened bits, hanging high above the tub, atop of my tensioned hips. Veins of brown water leaked from the dirt grains I grinded against myself. Once I was finished, droplets fell onto the water; and, as I needed to, I let my bladder go at the same time.

Draining the water and undressing myself, I opened the window; the Sun was high in the sky, reigning gloriously. Inclining myself over, while kneeling inside the tub, the right part of the sill, next to where my head was, became visible, and there, hanging, was a pair of eyes, framed by

the end of grey and jagged fingernails. I jolted back from repulsion and terror, afraid it would jump over me or get a hold of my arm, but the figure didn't move — not till, as a daydreaming impression would, it disappeared seamlessly. Thinking they were the eyes I'd seen in Francine's room, I made it there next.

By then, minutes passed. Too many, perhaps, for someone in haste. Regardless, refreshed and recomposed as I could ever be, I knocked on her apartment's closed door, ready to go chasing after her throughout the rest of the manor. Very to my surprise, she opened it, and invited me inside. *Thank goodness, you're alive!,* I said, resisting the urge of throwing my arms round her neck and hanging from it, akin to a huge collar pendant. As she looked surprised by seeing me rather impassioned, I added: *I've been worried about you, and it cheers me to see you're... perfectly fine.*

You're looking sharp yourself, she said, studying me briefly. *But perhaps too sharp for your own good; did you hurt yourself? You have the marks of someone that trailed the woods with the wrong shoes!* I acquiesced, not knowing what to say otherwise. Next, she made me sit in a small chair, while perusing a medicine drawer; I heard heavy vials being rolled away, till she started pouring something into a handkerchief. Much to my embarrassment, she walked towards me and, instead of handing me the tissue, she did sit in the floorboards, by my feet, pressing the cold cloth against the nastier scratches I had collected the night before.

You did receive my message, didn't you? I talked to Várr, and she confirmed, Fran then said, still tending me, looking down. *I regretted having to ask of her to make it to you in the first place; I didn't expected she would bother you while doing it.* As if surging from a dense fog, I said I did, and that that was precisely what she was holding yesterevening, in my place. Fran stopped what she was doing, and looked back at me, her face stern and serious. *We talked about it,* I said, returning her the same expression she was holding, but now not so certain. *About my father? About how, upon hearing my surname, something joggled your memory?*

She sighed in agreement. *Yes; you're right, I suppose,* she said. *But not in full. And if I'm not quite mistaken, I believe I misspelled your family name in my note. But I only saw it in printing by the afternoon; although the news reached us sooner. Hence the reason of my eagerness to reach you early that day.* Slightly annoyed, both given the fact I wasn't following what she was saying, and because I assumed the conversation's final goal to be a rehearsing of a tragedy only concerned to me, I demanded to know what it was to her, anyways.

As you may recall, she beginned, *I did say in my letter something along the lines of your name ringing 'some old bells' — and, yes, that was concerning your father's passing. I wasn't sure then if you and him bore ties of blood or not; not till... Ivy, I meant to tell you under better circumstances, not as I feel pressured to explain myself. It's about your mother. They found her two days ago, it seems; she hanged herself. I am terribly sorry.* She handed me the article, clipped from

the original journal's page; part of the title was missing, but one could still read the victim's name, nonetheless the annexed picture leaving rather little room for doubts.

Her eyes — to think I could ever not recognize them. Tears overcame me, and, sobbing, I retired to my room. Fran made with me part of the way, but I finally dismissed her, wanting to be alone. Feverishly, all the recent events surmounted me at once, and because of that I found no single tread to follow. Yet, somewhere, away from the shifting shadows projected by dancing clouds that did tell me time was still elapsing, somewhere absconded, lurking under my surface thoughts, as a hideous trapdoor spider, a linear narrative — as one long and sustained chord — was becoming clear and well-devised.

Afraid of losing the melody if I were to be awaken from the ravings that took possession over my faculties, brightening in the process hidden nooks, crevices and recesses, blind spots all, which theretofore clouded my judgment, I've decided on commiting it to writing. The initial intent was to address the whole of the manuscript to Francine; as the ending nears itself, standing just over the next corner, I see that it'll be better if that wasn't so. I will hide it, instead; either in the drawers under the bed, or between the pages of one of the largest volumes in the shelves above.

Of course, I am not oblivious of the redundancy of the last bit for whoever finds this document first. Still, I will have it inked and signed. Let it be know, at least to this one person, with all hereby confessed, the wicked things I did and the few still left to do, I pray loving my mother to not be one of them, because or despite her collusion with Francine's family, unbeknownst to her. As I am writing this, evening fades away; it shall be a moonless night, auspicious for a *Witches's Sabbath* or a *Caccia Infernale*. I prepare myself, one last time, to leave this apartment, and head towards my favourite part of this manor, or so once it was, the gallery.